GOVERNOR

JOSEPH JOHNSON,

—OF VIRGINIA.—

A BRIEF SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND CHARACTER

By an Intimate Friend.

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INTRODUCTION.

By one who knew him long, and as intimately as he was known by any one outside of his own immediate household, this small tribute is offered as a memento to his useful life, his talents and his virtues.

If this brief record shall serve in any degree to perpetuate the remembrance of his character, to cultivate a love for the higher and nobler qualities of our nature, and act as an incentive to the young to imitate the great and the good, it will have accomplished the wishes of its

AUTHOR.

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A man who is "self-made" often excels the mere college student —the man of letters, in mental vigor and the other qualities requisite to make the man, as much as the hard fisted mechanic excels him physically. The former, often without pecuniary means and that paternal or maternal care to give direction to his youthful yearnings or point him to the temple of science, learns of necessity, at an early age, to rely upon himself and is forced to become familiar with men and things, without a knowledge of which literary acquirements are mere ornaments.

A liberal education in early life is beyond price. It has enabled men to become an ornament to society and useful to their country, who, without it, would never have attracted attention. It is as true as old—"the mind makes the *man*;" for unless the Creator of all things has stamped upon him that which makes the *man*, learning will never do it. The mental powers of men are as diversified as the soils of the earth. Upon some you may pour a continual stream from the fountain of knowledge, but it will be as barren of fruit as the desert. Others will be improved and bring some fruit, whilst another class will yield a rich harvest in return for any seed that may fall in their way. Only bring them under the rays of science, and the germs of genius will spring and blossom like the rose. Such was the order of mind possessed by the subject of this sketch.

A large proportion of those useful men who enrolled their names on the scroll of fame and enshrined their memories in the hearts of their countrymen in the early days of our republic, did

not come from college to enter the public service, nor gain the esteem of the people by the means of a diploma. A clear head, strong common sense, an investigating and discriminating mind, coupled with energy, perseverance and an incorruptable honesty, are the requisites to qualify a man for great usefulness and to secure for him the love and confidence of his fellow men. Such a character was Joseph Johnson.

Joseph Johnson was born December 19, 1785, in Orange county, in the state of New York. He was the second son of Joseph Johnson and Abagail Wright. His father had been a soldier in the war for independence, and like most of the others, was poor, but respectable, however paradoxical this may seem to the moneyed aristrocracy and bribe takers of recent date. The time *was* when poverty was not a crime, nor regarded a disqualification for the highest office, nor was wealth then a mask to corruption. Would that capacity and fidelity were the tests for office *now*, as *then*!

Joseph was but five years of age when his father died, leaving a widow with five children. The mother moved with her children to Sussex county, in the state of New Jersey, in 1791, Joseph then being six years old. They resided there until 1801, when the mother with a married daughter and son-in-law, and her two little boys moved to Harrison county, in the state of Virginia. Joseph was then 15 years of age and the chief stay and protector of his mother and younger brother.

In illustration of his character, just then begining to bud, it may be mentioned that, within a month after their arrival in Virginia, this boy had of his own volition engaged to live with a highly respectable old gentleman farmer of the neighborhood by the name of Smith, whose health was delicate. This proved to be an eventful and auspicious business contract. Joseph soon won the old gentleman's regard, became his chief manager and lived with him until Mr. Smith's death. Soon after this event and before the subject of our sketch had arrived at the age of twenty-one, he married Miss Smith, one of the daughters of his old friend and employer. This proved a most fortunate marriage to each. In many respects their characters were so nearly the

counterpart of each other, it would be dificult to say which gained most by the union. She was noted for her gentleness and amiability of character. She lived and died a ripe Christian, without an enemy, and beloved by all who knew her.

Four years after his marriage, Joseph Johnson purchased the interests of the other heirs in the farm of his late father-in-law, moved upon it and made it his home as long as he lived. The farm adjoins the village of Bridgeport, a depot on the Parkersburg branch of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, and here he raised his family and lived nearly continuously for more than 70 years.

Harrison county is in what is now called West Virginia. When Mr. Johnson was married, that part of the state was almost covered with its primitive forest. Facilities for acquiring an education were very limited at best, and as every hour of his time during the day belonged to another, Joseph had acquired only such simple rudiments of an English education, as a boy who was determined to learn, could pick up by studying at night and odd moments. This continued for years, extending into his manhood, so that he was truly a self-educated man as far as it went.

He was now a farmer, and having to rely chiefly upon himself, he had but little time for anything else during the day. As an additional means of improvement, he got up a debating society in the village near him, which afterwards became famous for the ability of its members and the number thereof, who, in after years, filled political and other public stations. Here young Johnson found a place and opportunity for the gratification and cultivation of his tastes and talents, while putting to practical use the information he was culling from books. Here his talents soon attracted attention. His keen dissecting powers, his logic and his eloquence were rapidly developed and acknowledged by all who heard him. It was during this training, which was fitting him for the public positions he afterwards filled so well, that the diferences and discussions in regard to the pending war with England, was forced upon the public mind. Johnson at once took position with the Republican party, as the advocates of the war were then called. It was now that young Johnson was first brought into public view. He was Captain of a rifle company

of militia, and when the Atlantic sea-board was threatened in 1814, he called his company together, addressed them in a public speech, and induced them to consent unanimously that he might tender the services of the company *en masse* to the general government. He did so. They were promptly accepted, and the company marched to Norfolk. There at the front, they continued in the service till peace was secured in 1815, when, with a small remnant of his company he returned to their native hills.

Now commenced that long and useful political career for which his talents, his decision of character and unsullied integrity so eminently fitted him. In 1815 he was elected to the state Legislature, defeating the then famous Mr. Prunty, who had been in the legislature for twenty-two consecutive years. He continued in the legislature four years, when he declined another election, and returned to private life to look after his farm.

The writer has heard him say that he owed much of his early political life, to the persuasion and unqualified endorsement of himself by the then distinguished judge, John G. Jackson, of the same county. Jackson having been made United States judge declined a reëlection to Congress, and in 1823 persuaded Johnson to announce himself a candidate for Congress. He did so—advocating the principles of the Republican party of that day. He was opposed by Mr. (afterwards Judge,) Duncan of his own county, Col. T. S. Haymond, a Mr. Browning and the justly celebrated Phill. Doddridge. After one meeting of the candidates in the city of Wheeling, all withdrew from the canvass except Johnson and Doddridge. Doddridge was the senior of Johnson, an eminent lawyer, a fine and forcible speaker and possessed a mind that would have compared favorably with any other of his day. When he and Col. Johnson met on the stump, it was Greek meeting Greek. I have heard their rencounters related by those who witnessed them. To oppose Doddridge's experience and wonderful powers, both as an orator and a debater, Johnson was possessed of a spirit that quailed at nothing, an energy and an endurance that never failed, an intimate and sort of intuitive knowledge of human nature, a quick, keen, discriminating mind, capable of close logical reasoning, and an eloquence, not to be

acquired from the classics, the gift only of a creative power—magnetic in its influence and always equal to the energency.

Many years ago, I heard the Hon. Wm. S. Morgan describe the meeting between these men at Morgantown, Va., in this canvass of 1823; and he related an incident and parts of the discussion illustrative of the wonderful powers of recuperation and repartee ~~passed~~ possessed by each.

This heated and exciting canvass ended in a victory for Johnson. He took his seat in the eighteenth Congress, in December 1823. Henry Clay was made speaker of the House, and there was then assembled in the two houses of Congress the greatest array of distinguished talent that ever graced those halls. It was during this Congress the election of a president devolved on the House of Representatives. In this memorable contest, Col. Johnson, in the Virginia delegation, voted solitary and alone for Andrew Jackson from first to last. With this act of his, he was always entirely satisfied, and in the light of subsequent events, it was a source of great gratification. He was always an ardent admirer of that great man. When the old Republican party changed its name to that of Democratic, he went with it, and never after changed his party relations. He emphatically belonged to that school of politicians known as the "Jacksonian Democracy."

In 1825 he was again elected to Congress, beating Mr. Doddridge the second time in a spirited contest. In these cavasses they discussed the political issues of the day, never descending to gross personalities, hence, each retained the confidence and friendship of the other while they lived.

In the spring of 1827, Col. Johnson returned to his home and family, and was succeeded in Congress by a Mr. Lefler for two years, and then by Mr. Doddridge till his death in 1832. Col. Johnson was elected to the vacancy and served during the last session of the twenty-second Congress.

In the spring of 1833, he declined being a candidate for reëlection, and recommended and supported John J Allen for the place. Mr. Allen was an able lawyer and possessed very superior abilities. He was elected as a Republican, but during the twenty-third

Congress Mr. Allen separated himself from his party upon the United States Bank question, and in the spring 1835 Col. Johnson was called upon by his old political friends to again become a candidate and redeem the district, by opposing Mr. Allen, whom he had supported but two years before. He obeyed the call, and now occurred a canvass in some respects, the most remarkable, of his long political life. He and Allen lived in the same county. Mr. Allen was a cultivated and able lawyer, a fluent speaker, possessing superior mental abilities, and a character, the purity of which was never sullied during a long public life—during many years of which he was a member of the Supreme Court of the state, and finally its Chief Justice.

They canvassed the district actively and together. At that day the voting in each county was done on the respective court-days, and at the Court Houses only. This enabled them to meet and address most of the people on their respective days for voting. The election in their own county (Harrison) was held on the fourth Monday. The candidates were there. Each felt that the result depended upon the vote of that day, and they stripped for the fray. Each, perhaps, made the greatest effort of his life. The excitement became intense, and in after years, the writer has heard from those who witnessed it the legendary accounts of the discussion. When all the returns came in, the remarkable fact was discovered that, outside of their own county, the vote was a tie, and that in this, Johnson had a majority of 85 votes.

As in the case with Mr. Doddridge, these gentlemen retained through life the highest respect and cordial friendship for each other.

Johnson then continued in Congress for six consecutive years. Extracts from speeches, and reports from committees, made by him whilst in Congress might here be given, but they related chiefly to questions now obsolete, and have therefore lost their interest. Notwithstanding the gifts nature had bestowed upon him as a public speaker, he rarely occupied the time of the House, but was known as a *working* member,—always in his place, and giving prompt attention to his public duties and attending kindly

to any business of interest to his constituents. His modesty and unpretentious manners were as striking, as was his firmness when he had reached a conclusion, or his inspiring eloquence, when occasion arose to call it forth.

In 1841 he again retired to private life, to enjoy the sweets of a quiet home in the midst of a happy family, and supported Saml. L. Hays for Congress. Mr. Hays was elected; but at the next election in 1843, Mr. Hays was beaten by G. W. Summers, a Whig. In 1845 the Democratic party held a nominating convention, of which the writer was a member. This convention nominated Col. Johnson and again called upon him to redeem the district from the Whigs. He consented to try it, though he knew the parties were about equally divided, and Mr. Summers a competitor worthly of any man's steel. Mr. Summers who was fastidiously careful of his reputation, declined running for the position he then had, and Col. Camden with more courage, but less discretion, became the Whig candidate. Col. Camden was also a citizen of Harrison County, a respectable lawyer and personally popular. Col. Johnson was elected by a good majority.

This was the seventh time he had been elected to Congress. At the close of the twenty-ninth Congress, 1847, he issued an address to his constituents thanking them for past confidence, declining to be a candidate for reëlection and expressing his wish and purpose to retire to the shades of his private home during the remainder of his life. During this long Congressional career, though he had not changed his residence, he had represented at different times three distinct and almost different districts. Thus, at one time or another, he has represented in Congress nearly all the teritory now embraced in the state of West Virginia, excepting that small part composing the Eastern Panhandle.

During his absence, his county had been captured by the Whigs, and on his return home in the spring of 1847 his old party friends applied to him to become a candidate for the state Legislature in opposition to John S. Duncan, a young man of fine talents, and who was then walking over the course without a competitor. Johnson first refused, but when they reminded him how they had always responded to *his* calls, and now *they* were calling on *him*

to *serve them*, he yielded to their appeals, and redeemed the county so effectually, that it proved the political death of Mr. Duncan.

Returning from the Legislature to his home in 1848, he told the writer, he was done with public life forever; but was again destined to disappointment.

In 1850 an election was held for delegates to a state convention to remodal the constitutton, and he was elected a member of that body. He accepted the position, and on the assembling of the convention he was requested as the oldest man present, to call the body to order.

In that convention he was chairman of the committee on suffrage. The question of suffrage had attracted a good deal of attention in the state for years. The qualifications that then existed, to entitle a man to exercise the elective franchise in that state, had been thought by many good and wise men to be too stringent. This was especially so in the *western* part of Virginia, the section in which Col. Johnson lived. He sympathized with this sentiment, and as chairman of the committee, he reported and supported an article on this subject, which was very liberal in its provisions, and it was engrafted upon the new constitution. After it had been in operation a few years, and he had seen the effect of giving the right to every loafer and tramp who might stop six months in a county or ward of a city, and to those who would sell their votes for a drink of liquor, he changed his views somewhat, and said that something more than mere citizenship should be required to entitle one to vote. That should be required, which would make the voter feel *some* interest at least, in the state and its laws.

Whilst he was a member of the convention he was elected Governor of the state by the Legislature under the provisions of the then existing constitution. Under this election, he assumed the office and duties of Governor in December, 1851.

In the fall of 1851, the new constitution which he had helped to frame was adopt d, and at the same time Johnson, who had been nominated by the Democrats, was elected Governor by the popular vote of the people for the term of four years, beginning January 1st 1852. This was the first time in the history of the

state, that its Governor had been elected by the votes of the *people* and he was the *first* and *only* man ever elected Governor of Virginia from that part of the state now comprised in West Virginia.

This being the first election of Governor by the people, and each party claiming that theirs would gain most by the extension of suffrage, they nominated those who were generally regarded the strongest men before the people. The Whigs nominated Geo. W. Summers of Kanawha County. Mr. Summers was an educated and experienced lawyer, an able and popular man. After a warm and active canvass, Johnson was elected by about 9,000 majority.

In his first message to the Legislature, in 1851, he recommended the completion of the James River and Kanawha canal to *Clifton Forge, as its western terminus for the time*, and the extension of the Central railroad, (now called C. & O.) from Staunton, by Clifton Forge, westward to the Ohio river, at or near Guyandotte; together with a general system of rail roads for the residue of the state. His recommendations on this subject were literally adopted by the Legislature,—the work on the different lines begun and rapidly pushed forward, till the breaking out of the war in 1861. Though not yet quite completed, the state has begun to realize the benefits to result from the system.

In the same message he called attention to the importance and delicacy of our Federal relations, foreshadowing in mild but clear language, what he then thought might occur between the sections; all of which has since been fully realized.

In his last message to the legislature dated December 3rd, 1855, and which might (as its author intended it) be regarded as his farewell address and withdrawal from public life, he so vividly, pictured that which was likely to occur from violations of the national compact by northern individuals and state legislatures, that, with the lights now before us, his warnings may well be regarded, as a sort of prophetic vision. His views on this subject were generally concurred in by his people of both parties. After filling the Executive chair for four years with such sagacity and fidelity as to give entire satisfaction to his political friends, and

to deprive his political opponents of every pretext for dissatisfaction or criticism, he again bade adieu to public life, and returned to the quiet shades of his own home amid the universal plaudits of his fellow citizens of "Well done, thou true and faithful servant."

A few (but very few) "sore heads" there were. These were "*old hunkers*"—mostly Whigs who had wormed themselves into all the State boards—such as Bank Directors, Directors of the Institutions at Staunton &c., and had held them so long, "rings" had been formed. Gov. Johnson could not appreciate the divinity of the right by which they claimed to hold these positions, and instituted the practice of changing those boads. Some of these thus displaced (as A. H. H. S. for example) could never forgive him. This practice has been followed by his successors, and approved by the people ever since.

He had filled, the office of Presidential Elector several times, and now at the age of three score and ten years, nearly forty of these having been spent in the service of his country, with a private and public character that had never been stained by a suspicion, ripe in experience and crowned with honors, with mental and physical powers little impaired, he prepared to spend the remainder of his days at the home where he had married his wife (then deceased) and where he had lived for more than 50 years, in the enjoyment of the association of long tried friends.

Here, Gov. Johnson received and dispensed a hospitality that warms the heart, sweetens and refines society, and sheds a sweet fragrance on the amenities of life. In the private walks of life he was a model of human excellence. He was proverbally punctual in all things, and his morals pure and lofty. He was below the medium height, well formed for endurance, dark complexion, with a bright black eye, that flashed as if on fire when animated in debate. His countenance was attractive, inteligent and expressive of a strong mind. In conversation he was very agreable and instructive, enlivening the social circle with aphorisms and pungent anecdotes. In all he was modest, chaste and discreet, an honorable opponent, never underrating his adversary nor overrating himself. As a patriot, neighbor and friend Governor Johnson had no superior.

But he was permitted to enjoy this elysium only five years. In 1860 he saw the material collecting for a conflagration, and though hoping that Providence, Who had so often favored us as a nation, would provide for us a way of escape from the calamities of war, he caught the first glimpses of the conflict as the dark cloud arose upon the country's horizon in 1861. He was a strict constructionist of the Federal constitution, regarding that instrument as a written compact between the states composing the Union; that the Union was the creature of the states, and all powers not delegated to the general government were expressly reserved to the states. He was therefore a state-rights Democrat of the Jacksonian school. During his long eventful public life he had denounced the doctrine of nullification, and opposed the policy of Secession as of doubtful expediency. He believed that Virginia in entering the Union had reserved the right in the last resort to be the judge of her own wrongs and as to the best mode of securing and enjoying her rights. With Mr. Webster, he believed "A contract broken in part, was broken all around." He never was a secessionist *per-se*. He loved the *union of our fathers*, and always advised moderation and patience. He desired and hoped for a peaceful solution of our sectional differences until president Lincoln called upon Virginia and other states for troops to subjugate the Southern states, who he verily believed had been wronged and were threatened with grosser outrage. At this critical period he was called upon by his old constituents to address them publicly at their Court house on the subject of their duty in the premises. Though now in his 76th year, he responded in a public speech. He was not one to sleep in the half-way house, he preferred to fight his enemies rather that be arrayed against his friends. He believed his allegiance was first due to his state, and determined to make her enemies his. He advised others by telling them how he should act. Accordingly he identified himself with the Southern cause, and though too old and infirm to take part in the field as he had done in 1814, he gave to the Confederacy his hearty sympathy and support, amid personal privations and with a determination to share in the fate of her cause. In after life he saw no reason to change his politi-

cal opinions, or cause to regret anything he had done in the premises,—much less to ask pardon of any one. In 1861, he was one of the Presidential electors who cast the vote of Virginia for Jefferson Davis.

At the beginning of hostilities, that part of Virginia in which Gov. Johnson lived (the north-west) was overrun by the Federal troops. As they came in, he was in luced by the urgent advice of friends to leave his home in charge of his single daughter and cross the mountains with the regiments that volunteered to join the Confederates, and spent most of the four years of war in the Valley of Virginia, thus escaping either murder by a brutal soldiery or the more refined cruelties of Camp Chase, where so many others gave up their lives rather that renounce their fidelity to their beloved state, Virginia. Gov. Johnson had put but a few miles between himself and his home before it was surrounded by a rabid soldiery, who hissed and hurled their curses at his daughter when they found their intended prey had eluded them

Time nor tears can ever blot out the disgraceful stigma that rests upon the Federal goverment and the names of Seward and Stanton and their agents, for the wanton destruction and appropriation to private uses of private property, and abuse of the weak and defenceless who unfortunately fell in their power during this war.

Soon after the surrender of the Confederate armies, Governor Johnson returned to his home to find his intrepid maiden daughter standing like a sentinel at the post where he had left her, and to be warmly welcomed by old and tried friends. The new state (an illegitimate child of Virginia,) West Virginia, had been organized. All who had sympathised with the Confederate cause (comprising as a general rule the best citizens of the state,) had been disfranchised by the Jacobin legislature, and Johnson determined at the first general election after his return, to see if the little puppets of the ring-masters who then had charge of the polls had the nerve to refuse his vote in his presence. Their oaths required it, but they looked confusedly at each other, then upon the gronnd, and he deposited his vote without objection.

Now at 80 years of age, he bade adieu to politics except the

interest felt by every inteligent patriot in every thing pertaining to the welfare of his beloved country, and his fellow man, and devoted himself to the enjoyment of social intercourse with his children and other intimate friends, and in seeking a nearer and more intimate relation to his Father in Heaven. These occupied almost his entire time and thoughts for the last ten years of his life. As in everything else, he was punctual in his Christian duties, and would let nothing interfere with his religious services. If possible, the remarkable excellences of his character shone forth more brightly in his Christian life, than in his long and useful public career. He was a useful member of the Baptist denomination, but, his was not a narrow, sectarian religion; he recognized Christians in all the Evangelical churches. He was not a Pharisee in any sense; he endeavored to keep himself unspotted from the world, do all the good he could and practice that primitive Christianity taught by the Apostles.

So temperate and uniform had been his habits, at the age of 83 he visited a married daughter, Mrs. Horner, in the state of Arkansas, and as late as 1874, when 89 years of age, he visited another daughter, Mrs. John A. English, in Baltimore City, more than 300 miles from his home. During this visit, he was in Washington City, and visited both houses of Congress where he had served as a member of the House of Representation more than 50 years before. He met with but few with whom he had served in Congress at any time, but was received and treated by the members of the House with marked courtesy and attention—the speaker leaving his seat to have an introduction. He enjoyed this visit to Congress very much. Here he had been associated with Clay, Webster, Calhoun, Hayne, Adams, Benton, Silas Wright, W. C. Rives and others—all of whom had passed over the River, leaving him the last of a past generation.

He had been personally acquainted with all the Presidents from Jefferson to Grant, having served with Adams, Pierce, Buchanan, Lincoln and Johnson in Congress. It was entertaining in the extreme to hear him delineate the characters of these great men. He was older than the constitution, had lived to see 25

states added to the old 13, and the population increaseed from four to forty millions.

Being at the Court House of his county (Clarksburg), on court day, in October, 1874, his old friends and constituents so importuned him for his views and advice upon the public events of the times, he had to make a short address. He spoke to them not as a partizan, but in the spirit of a parting address from a father to his children. Excited and stimulated by the occasion his mind exhibited its wonted vigor. This was too much for his physical powers, and by request of the crowd he finished his address sitting, amid the cheers of the multitude.

He spent his leisure hours, during the last two years of his life in superintending and contributing liberally to the rebuilding and furnishing of the Baptist church near his residence, where his mother and wife had worshiped before him, and where there had been an organized church membership for more than a hundred consecutive years; and as fit opportunity offered, giving his unqualified testimony to the truth and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was a treat to hear him in his quiet, convincing manner tell of his faith and foretaste (as he described it) of the "joy that remained for all who loved God." A distinguished traveller from another state who visited him during this time, in describing his visit in a letter to the *Religious Herald*, said: "In all my travels in both hemispheres, I have seldom met a person so easy in all his manners as Governor Johnson."

This good and great man (for men are only great as they are pure and good,) closed his long and useful career at his home where he had lived for more than 70 years, surrounded by most of his children who survived him and friends who mourned him as a relation, on the morning of the 27th of February 1877, in the 92nd year of his age. He passed away as a babe goes to sleep.

The next day a public meeting of the citizens of Clarksburg was held to give expression to their sympathy and appreciation of his character. Here, the leading men of every political party bore testimony to his talents and the purity of his private and public life. The day following, he was buried by the side of his wife

after a beautiful and impressive sermon to a large, weeping congregation, by the Rev. E. J. Willis, from the very appropriate text, "Them that honor me, I will honor."—*I Saml.—2 ch., 30 v.*